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ABSTRACT

A wealth of African-American resources have remained "hidden resources," even as interest in and need for these rare documents has risen. Digitizing collections would make these materials available through the Internet and World Wide Web. Many of these materials reside in historically black institutions which oftentimes lack the resources to transform them to digital modes. The paper identifies institutions that have made efforts to preserve African-American collections, and describes problems associated with digitizing African-American collections held at many academic institutions. Possible solutions to the demand for the latest technology within the constraints of a library's budget include: make critical decisions early in the developmental process; keep the technology simple; seek grants for funding; and begin with digitizing only a limited subset of materials. The digital system has arrived in the academic library; it will remain and evolve there, and it will provide new means of retrieving lost, strayed, and forgotten materials from the African-American experience. Problems associated with access will not disappear, interwoven as they are with copyrights, networking between institutions, and the fact that no regular, formal educational program will automatically produce the specialists needed in the field of these materials. (SWC)

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African-American Heritage Collections Go Digital: Once Hidden Cultural Treasures Find the Route to Accessibility and Popularity Through High Technology in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

The author examines the wealth of African-American resources that have remained "hidden resources" even as interest in and need for these rare documents has risen. Digitizing these collections would be ideal for making these materials available through the Internet and World Wide Web. Many of these materials reside in historically black institutions which oftentimes lack the resources to transform them to digital modes.

Carter G. Woodson once commented that if a race has no history, if it has no worth-while tradition, it stands in danger of being exterminated. The struggles of Woodson and others over the years to unearth and bring to life the supposedly nonexistent records of the African-American experience has reaped a rich harvest. There is ample proof that African-Americans are endowed with a treasure house of history and traditions. New interest in and need for materials related to African-Americana is manifested in such areas as the big-budget production of the film Armistead. There are continuing efforts to "reach back in time to pull out more of what, a few years ago, was not there."[1] Academic libraries, in particular, with African-American collections, are firmly committed to the collection, the preservation, and the dissemination of these materials. Yet however exemplary commitment and activism might be, issues revolving around improved means of access and maintenance of the collections remain to be addressed.

Because of the present and future needs of students, faculty, researchers, and the African-American community for information resources, digitizing content would seem the logical extension of the other technological innovations revolutionizing the academic library. Despite the undoubted ability of digitalization to provide visual access to historical photographs, documents, and manuscripts in real time, movement in this direction has been slow to establish itself as a force in the information context. Digitizing African-American archival collections remain an all too hidden Resource.

Certainly, the concept of a digital library system is not completely foreign to those institutions with important African-American collections. Fisk University, for example, is in the process of creating products related to the Jubilee experience which was instrumental in their earlier survival. Tulane was involved with materials relevant to the Armistead incident which involved a murderous slave revolt. The academic library of Tennessee State University, with which I am associated, has established some work on local projects involving African-American history and biography. While these efforts are encouraging and praiseworthy, the results have been below modest expectations in rendering access to the myriad repositories of African-American collections around the country. Major repositories such as Hampton University's George Foster Peabody, Howard University's Moorland Spingarn, Temple University's Charles Blockson, New York Public Library's Schomburg , Chicago Public Library's Vivian Harsh collections offer a rich body of research by and about African-Americans which can be harnessed through state-of-the art technology. However, some believe that by making these collections available through the Internet and World Wide Web, would compromise their holdings uniqueness and ownership. In this sense, archivist will only make such resources as guides available on the Web sites for public consumption.

Reasons for the Slow Pace

Several reasons, the author believes, are responsible for the slow pace in converting collections of African-American materials, and particular parts of those collections into a digitized format. The type of materials and the type of usage of those materials has been cited[2] as a problem generally associated with the transformation of materials to a digital library system. To perhaps a greater degree than many other holdings, African-American documents, photographs,

and manuscripts have suffered damage over time, were of poor quality originally, and were carelessly maintained. "Difficult" materials, probably the main source and most consequential of the collections - periodicals and newspapers, monographs, pamphlets, and bulletins, diaries, scrapbooks, etc., tend to have been indifferently preserved. Replacing these materials is often impossible, repairing them is a costly, labor intensive undertaking.

Another causation of delay in digitalization of African-American collections is debate over whether the subsequent database will benefit an entire range of academic departments or only several. Will the demand for and interest in these materials remain high enough to justify the high costs associated with the technology? Of course, funding is always a primary drawback when discussing any introduction of technological change in the academic library. Who will pay, how much, and for what, becomes the most pressing issue. As this writer recognizes, the problem of cost to benefit is especially acute for traditionally Black university and colleges, where the body of African-American materials reside. Is digitalization of these materials more critical than other needs and desires expressed by faculty and students?

Other questions that retard digitalization include[3] decisions about technologies, appropriately trained staff, data standards, and indexing and retrieval methodologies. These difficulties must be weighed with the contention[4] that there is no evidence that the digitized library is cheaper than older models for the transmission of data given the cost of the technology and the need to invest continuously in ever changing technology. Finally, an academic library must always guard against the transmission of materials for which the copyright is not held or if that material is not in the public domain. The matter of copyright law in an information society is one that is far from resolved.

Possible Solutions

In the instance of the Tennessee State University's Brown-Daniel Library, the mandate to push on with digitizing the African-American collections is a "non-issue." Availability of access to library resources is an integral part of its mission statement. How then to respond to the demand for the latest technology within the constraints of the Library's budget? (1) Make the critical decisions early in the developmental process. Recognize these decisions will profoundly effect how the database will be accessed and utilized by local and remote clientele, who will actually use the materials, and ensure the continued performance of the database when the present technology inevitably advances.[5] (2) Keep the technology as simple as possible. The tried-and-true equipment and software may be more suitable, and quite as adequate as highly promoted top-of-the-line products. (3) Practice networking, for example, off-site duplication of materials found in other collections of African-Americana. These include items too valuable and fragile for actual exhibition. As a case in point, Fisk University has digitized and offered on-line portions of its 7 million-piece collection, among which are: The Bible presented to Abraham Lincoln in 1865 by freed slaves from Maryland, and 1808 "slave Bible" with every passage about freedom deleted by slave owners, and writings of W.E.B. DuBois, Fisk's most eminent graduate.[6] (4) Look for grant sources for funding. Grants from the Ford Foundation, IBM, and Virginia Commonwealth University permitted VCU to construct the Multicultural Archives database, consisting of documents borrowed from the African-American community. The documents were scanned, processed by optical character recognition technology, and stored on optical disks. Access is possible to materials that are privately held and rarely donated or shared by the owners.[7] (5) No attempt will be made to digitize the entire collection. A limited subset of materials representing

those most used by students and deemed of special merit by the relevant faculty creates a good, but not daunting "technical platform" on which to build over time.[8]

Digital Academic Libraries: The Only Future?

Is digitization a true revolution in the effort to ensure more access to and preservation of African-American collections, allowing what has been for too long hidden resources to at last be revealed to all seeking this rich vein of tradition, or is it only another step in the evolution of the academic library? Digital systems represent part of the awareness by academic librarians that in order to exist, to serve their clients, new technologies have to be embraced. The secret is the ability to add on those new technologies without losing the best of older, time-tested methods.[9] There are those who would contend that the Internet would soon displace the library as we know it today, that the technological information and communication devices will engulf those institutions that do not instantly transform themselves into the electronic model.[10] There are reasons to doubt this pronouncement that the library must immediately abandon all that is still functional if it is to survive. Indeed, financial considerations, the need to train staff in usage of new innovations such as digital mechanisms, and researching what students and faculty, as well as the community want and need from the academic library denote an evolutionary process. Some resources may well remain "hidden" because access and preservation does not mean "popularity" for all materials. The digital system has arrived in the academic library, it will remain and evolve there, and it will provide new means of retrieving last, strayed, and forgotten materials from the African-American experience. Problems with access will not disappear, interwoven as they are with copyrights, networking between institutions, and the fact that no regular, formal educational

program will automatically produce the specialists needed in the field of these materials. The digital library has arrived in finding the hidden resources that mark the African-American experience, yet much work has to be done in order that this wellspring of information can be presented to the public at-large.

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